

INTRODUCTION

Race and Ethnicity in the Workplace: Spotlighting the Perspectives of Historically Stigmatized Groups

Victoria C. Plaut
University of California, Berkeley

Kecia M. Thomas
University of Georgia

Michelle R. Hebl
Rice University

One might argue that race and ethnicity influence the workplace setting more than any other setting. The workplace provides unique opportunities to express one's identity and to work interactively with others in various competitive and cooperative situations. The workplace also provides opportunities for the expression of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. People do not simply leave their racial and ethnic identities at home, and the workplace is not immune from societal forms of racial and ethnic bias. In short, race and ethnicity are salient in and matter in a variety of ways at work.

Moreover, people spend a lot of time at work. According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2013a\)](#), employed Americans (aged 25 to 54 with children) spend almost 9 hr a day working, and spend more time working than in any other activity. Additionally, 85% of employed persons (15 years and older) report doing some or all of their work at their workplace, and they spend substantially more time working at the workplace than at home (7.9 hr vs. 3 hr; [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013b](#)). Despite the salience of race and ethnicity in the work context, and the significant amount of time spent at work, journals that emphasize culture, race, and ethnic studies rarely focus on workplace discrimination, or on other stressors and opportunities that racial and ethnic minorities experience in the workplace. Furthermore, journals that emphasize work devote relatively little attention to the workplace realities of racial and ethnic minorities from the perspective of members of those groups.

The need for greater attention to, and more research on, racial and ethnic identity and experiences in the workplace inspired our managing editor, Michael Zárate, and our team of coeditors to create this special issue of *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*. Our call for papers sought articles using I/O constructs and research conducted in business environments that focused on racial and ethnic minority experiences. We also were particularly interested in identifying and highlighting workplace issues from the perspective of racial and ethnic minorities. We privileged this lens because much of the work on ethnic and racial minority issues, including in the workplace, has been conducted from the perspective of majority "perceivers" rather than from the perspective of members of historically stigmatized groups. Thus, we know a great deal about the way in which perceivers express their prejudice and moderator conditions of such prejudice, but we know relatively less about how prejudice is experienced by its targets.

Although there are exceptions, this trend generally has translated into a focus on the prejudiced attitudes of White Americans, and on the effects of these attitudes on members of racial and ethnic minority groups, thus decentering the voices of the very groups this research often seeks to benefit or at least understand ([Wildman & Davis, 1996](#)). Of course, there could be other reasons for the relative lack of attention to racial and ethnic minorities' perspectives, such as the availability of employees of color as research participants (see [Thompson, Bergman, Culbertson, & Huffman, 2013](#)). Regardless of the reasons, this focus has led to a number of assumptions about how race and ethnicity matter in the workplace and a limited sense of the complexity of what people of color experience in the workplace ([Nkomo, 1992](#)). Of course, research from the "perceiver" side can tell us much about, for example, individuals' propensities to discriminate ([Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986](#); [Eagly & Karau, 2002](#)), reactions to discrimination claimants ([Kaiser & Miller, 2001](#)), mentors' adoption of protégés ([D. A. Thomas, 1990](#)), majority group members' feelings of threat ([Craig & Richeson, 2014](#); [Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011](#)), diversity

Victoria C. Plaut, School of Law, University of California, Berkeley; Kecia M. Thomas, Department of Psychology, University of Georgia; Michelle R. Hebl, Department of Psychology, Rice University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Victoria C. Plaut, University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, Berkeley, CA 94720-7200. E-mail: vplaut@law.berkeley.edu

resistance in organizations (K. M. Thomas, 2008), effects of diversity training on dominant group members' attitudes (Madera, King, & Hebl, 2013; Rynes & Rosen, 1995), and the reduction of prejudice (Paluck & Green, 2009). In most of these scenarios, the perceivers are White.

There is still much we do not know, however, about what members of racial and ethnic minority groups are experiencing in the workplace, how they cope, how they relate to others in their community or family around these issues, and how they enact change. In our call for papers, we were particularly interested in efforts to better understand and address major complex workplace issues such as experiences of tokenism, interpersonal relationships, and support networks; how best to identify, confront, and cope with discrimination; and how to change workplaces; as well as highlighting novel experiences for racial and ethnic minorities in the workplace that have not previously been identified by the research literature. We also were interested in research on moderators of experiences of discrimination (e.g., life span and career stage; occupation and industry; intersection of race and other identities such as gender, class, and sexualities).

The articles ultimately published in this special issue address many of these topic areas either directly or indirectly, and represent a number of themes that are important to the workplace experiences and outcomes of racial and ethnic minorities. They include

- experiences of tokenization (Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014, pp. 483–490);
- experiences of incivility and discrimination (Krings, Johnston, Binggeli, & Maggiori, 2014, pp. 491–498);
- color-blind racial attitudes and perceptions of workplace microaggressions (Offermann et al., 2014, pp. 499–507);
- social identity threat and situational cues that signal threat/devaluation versus respect/affirmation (Emerson & Murphy, 2014, pp. 508–520);
- the effect of metastereotypes on employability beliefs and the role of self-esteem in this process (Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2014, pp. 521–528);
- racial identity-based impression management (Roberts, Cha, & Kim, 2014, pp. 529–540);
- the relationship of social support and coping strategies with job–family role strain and career and life satisfaction (Linnabery, Stuhlmacher, & Towler, 2014, pp. 541–549); and
- occupational socialization of adolescents by their mothers (Hagelskamp & Hughes, 2014, pp. 550–560).

Moreover, whereas previous research has primarily focused on White “perceivers” and/or on Black–White discrimination (see Plaut, 2010; Ruggs et al., 2013), the participant samples in this special issue include a broader representation of groups:

- Black American professional men (doctors, lawyers, bankers, and engineers).
- Black American professional women (staff and managers, the majority of whom were employed by a for-profit company).
- Asian American journalists (including Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Korean).
- African American, Latina (Puerto Rican and Dominican), Chinese, and White dyads of mothers and adolescents.
- University students of various backgrounds residing the U.S. mid-Atlantic.
- Female university students and participants of South Asian ethnic descent in the United Kingdom.
- A representative sample of Swiss residents, including immigrants and nonimmigrants.

Together, these articles cover a lot of ground thematically. They illuminate multiple stages of the job process throughout the life span: youth's socialization experiences, beliefs about the difficulty of getting a job, and experiences once one holds a job. Content in this special issue stresses the importance of understanding not only what happens on the job but also of understanding systems of support and socialization outside the job. Furthermore, the content in this special issue focuses our attention not only on racial and ethnic minorities' perceptions of negative workplace experiences (e.g., tokenization, discrimination, incivilities, microaggressions) but also on identity management, coping, and support.

Methodologically, the articles in this special issue include results from correlational survey studies, experiments, and focus groups. In addition, we include one theoretical article. One sample is nationally representative, whereas others are convenience samples. Most of the participants in this research are actual workers from multiple occupations and industries. The presence of concerns across multiple occupations and identity groups highlights the ubiquity of workplace issues surrounding racial and ethnic identity. The presence of research in multiple countries also highlights that the experience being a racial minority may not be the same across countries, but there is still an experience of being “othered.”

However, there is also a lot that our set of articles does not address. While some of the articles consider the intersection of race and gender, more research is needed on the intersection of race and sexuality. Additionally, although the articles cover a range of occupations, much of the focus is on high-status occupations, and more attention could be given to the intersection of race and ethnicity with class. We also would benefit from more research on working status (full-time as opposed to part-time workers or the underemployed). Although the

special issue does cover a variety of groups, as others have noted (Plaut, 2010; Ruggs et al., 2013), there are still opportunities to further highlight the experiences of groups beyond the Black–White binary. For example, we know little about the intragroup experiences and dynamics of historically subordinated groups within workplace environments. Additionally, although our articles span several countries, the focus is generally on a few highly industrialized, Western countries—how do these processes operate and what are other prominent concerns in countries in the Global South (i.e., in Africa, Latin America, and much of Asia)? Several of the articles in the special issue either directly or indirectly assess the experiences of immigrants, but there is still a lot to learn about the workplace experiences of immigrants in the United States and other liberal democracies, including the experiences of individuals without authorization to work in the country in which they reside.

In addition to covering the experiences of different groups and intersecting identities, we also could learn more about experiences in certain aspects of work life. For example, we know relatively little about the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in receiving and providing mentoring and coaching, and in other professional development domains. More broadly, we can learn more about racial and ethnic minority experiences in the workplace in groups and in dynamic interaction with others (see Shelton, Dovidio, Hebl, & Richeson, 2008). Another consideration is application on which, with the exception of the theory article, most of the articles do not focus. Relatedly, what can minority workers do differently to improve their outcomes? Further, what can researchers do methodologically in going beyond self-report in assessing racial and ethnic minorities' experiences (e.g., physiological markers of stress), and to tie racial and ethnic minorities' experiences to actual outcomes (e.g., pay, performance evaluation, turnover)?

In conclusion, racial and ethnic identity matter and are salient for people in the workplace—a place where people spend a substantial amount of their time. This special issue brings the workplace into the domain of racial and ethnic minority psychology. It also brings to the study of the workplace a relatively neglected perspective: that of people from historically stigmatized racial and ethnic groups. Though there is, of course, need for more work with different themes, outcomes, and populations, this special issue takes us an important step in the direction of understanding better and giving voice to the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in the workplace.

References

- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2013a). *Charts from the American Time Use Survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/home.htm>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2013b). *American Time Use Survey summary*. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm>
- Craig, M. A., & Richeson, J. A. (2014). More diverse yet less tolerant? How the increasingly diverse racial landscape affects White Americans' racial attitudes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *40*, 750–761. doi:10.1177/0146167214524993
- Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (1986). *Prejudice, discrimination, and racism: Historical trends and contemporary approaches*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, *109*, 573–598. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573
- Emerson, K. T. U., & Murphy, M. C. (2014). Identity threat at work: How social identity threat and situational cues contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in the workplace. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *20*, 508–520. doi:10.1037/a0035403
- Hagelskamp, C., & Hughes, D. L. (2014). Workplace discrimination predicting racial/ethnic socialization across African American, Latino, and Chinese families. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *20*, 550–560. doi:10.1037/a0035321
- Kaiser, C. R., & Miller, C. T. (2001). Stop complaining! The social costs of making attributions to discrimination. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *27*, 254–263. doi:10.1177/0146167201272010
- Krings, F., Johnston, C., Binggeli, S., & Maggiori, C. (2014). Selective incivility: Immigrant groups experience subtle workplace discrimination at different rates. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *20*, 491–498. doi:10.1037/a0035436
- Linnabery, E., Stuhlmacher, A. F., & Towler, A. (2014). From whence cometh their strength: Social support, coping, and well-being of black women professionals. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *20*, 541–549. doi:10.1037/a0037873
- Madera, J. M., King, E., & Hebl, M. (2013). Enhancing the effects of sexual orientation diversity training: The effects of setting goals and training mentors on attitudes and behaviors. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, *28*, 79–91. doi:10.1007/s10869-012-9264-7
- Nkomo, S. M. (1992). The emperor has no clothes: Rewriting “race in organizations.” *The Academy of Management Review*, *17*, 487–513. doi:10.5465/AMR.1992.4281987
- Offermann, L. R., Basford, T. E., Graebner, R., Jaffer, S., Graaf, S. B. D., & Kaminsky, S. E., (2014). See no evil: Color blindness and perceptions of subtle racial discrimination in the workplace. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *20*, 499–507. doi:10.1037/a0037237

- Owuamalam, C. K., & Zagefka, H. (2014). On the psychological barriers to the workplace: When and why metastereotyping undermines employability beliefs of women and ethnic minorities. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 20*, 521–528. doi:10.1037/a0037645
- Paluck, E. L., & Green, D. P. (2009). Prejudice reduction: What works? A review and assessment of research and practice. *Annual Review of Psychology, 60*, 339–367. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163607
- Plaut, V. C. (2010). Diversity science: Why and how difference makes a difference. *Psychological Inquiry, 21*, 77–99. doi:10.1080/10478401003676501
- Plaut, V. C., Garnett, F. G., Buffardi, L., & Sanchez-Burks, J. (2011). “What about me?” Perceptions of exclusion and Whites’ reactions to multiculturalism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 101*, 337–353. doi:10.1037/a0022832
- Roberts, L. M., Cha, S. E., & Kim, S. S. (2014). Strategies for managing impressions of racial identity in the workplace. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 1*, 2–3. doi:10.1037/a0037238
- Ruggs, E. N., Law, C., Cox, C., Roehling, M. V., Wiener, R. L., Hebl, M., & Barron, L. (2013). Gone fishing: I–O psychologists’ missed opportunities to understand marginalized employees’ experiences with discrimination. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 6*, 39–60. doi:10.1111/iops.12007
- Rynes, S., & Rosen, B. (1995). A field survey of factors affecting the adoption and perceived success of diversity training. *Personnel Psychology, 48*, 247–270. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6570.1995.tb01756.x
- Shelton, J. N., Dovidio, J. F., Hebl, M., & Richeson, J. A. (2008). Prejudice and intergroup interaction. In S. Demoulin, J. P. Leyens, & J. F. Dovidio (Eds.), *Intergroup misunderstandings: Impact of divergent social realities* (pp. 21–38). New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Thomas, D. A. (1990). The impact of race on managers’ experiences of developmental relationships (mentoring and sponsorship): An intra-organizational study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 11*, 479–492. doi:10.1002/job.4030110608
- Thomas, K. M. (2008). *Diversity resistance in organizations*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Thompson, R., Bergman, M., Culbertson, S. S., & Huffman, A. (2013). Yes, we’re fishing—In rough waters for hard-to-find fish. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 6*, 61–65. doi:10.1111/iops.12008
- Wildman, S. M., & Davis, A. D. (1996). *Privilege revealed: How invisible privilege undermines America*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Wingfield, A. H., & Wingfield, J. H. (2014). When visibility hurts and help: How intersections of race and gender shape black professional men’s experiences with tokenization. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 20*, 483–490. doi:10.1037/a0035761